

The Fifth Sunday after the Epiphany

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This week I stumbled upon a lesser-known creation account I thought might be of interest to you. It goes like this:

In the beginning there were days set aside for various tasks.
On the day He was to create justice
God got involved in making a dragonfly

and lost track of time.
It was about two inches long
with turquoise dots all down its back like Lauren Bacall.

God watched it bend its tiny wire elbows
as it set about cleaning the transparent case of its head.
The eye globes mounted on the case

rotated this way and that
as it polished every angle.
Inside the case

which was glassy black like the windows of a downtown bank
God could see the machinery humming
and He watched the hum

travel all the way down turquoise dots to the end of the tail
and breathe off as light.
Its black wings vibrated in and out.

That's actually a poem by Anne Carson titled "God's Justice." Usually, I provide a trigger warning when a poem's about to make an appearance in a sermon, but I thought I'd drop this one in unannounced and see what happens. Christian Wiman says it's not so much a creation account as the book of Job in 18 lines.

It's an unsettling idea, isn't it? That the world might be an unjust place because God got distracted and never quite got around to creating justice, even if the thing that distracted God was something as undeniably cool as a dragonfly or, over in Job, a great sea monster or a cluster of distant stars.

But distraction is relative. If you're distracted from one thing, it's because you've given your attention to something else. If the poem held your interest, it's probably because you got distracted by that dragonfly too. By the turquoise dots all down its back like Lauren Bacall. I mean ... she had me at Lauren Bacall. And at the bending of those tiny wire elbows. And the hum of the bug's internal machinery that travels to the end of its tail and breathes off as light... Two inches of this marvelous world can hold a lot of human attention if that's what we decide to

give it to. It's enough to make you wonder if this is a distraction from God's justice, or the kind of loving attention upon which even justice may depend.

"Have you not known?" asks the prophet. "Have you not heard? Has it not been told you from the beginning? Have you not understood from the foundations of the earth? It is he who sits above the circle of the earth, and its inhabitants are like grasshoppers; who stretches out the heavens like a curtain, and spreads them like a tent to live in..." For my money, this is biblical language at its most fabulous and fine, right up there with Job. Even though my honest answer to each of these questions is no. No, I haven't really known or heard much about anything of which you speak. I don't understand much about the foundations of the earth, since I'm just one of the countless grasshoppers making my way through life here, way down below that stretched out curtain of sky.

You'd be forgiven for bristling at being compared to a grasshopper by this divine Mr. Miyagi. It seems like a slight. But have you looked at a grasshopper recently? Have you watched its mouth unhinge so the tiny finger-like appendages, sensibly mounted right on its jaws, can stuff a seed right in. Have you considered what it would be like to have legs that could propel you, lumbering earthbound human that you are, up and over Calvary's bell tower and across Adams Avenue, if the need arose? Did you forget, as I do every single day of my life, what a marvelous and miraculous creation a grasshopper actually is, right down to its smallest and most overlook-able features?

If this sermon is beginning to feel like a series of digressions that's because that's what it is. Or at least that's what it hopes to be. The Bible is not free of concepts and explanations and commentary. But after years of standing in pulpits trying to make some kind of sense of it to curious, open-hearted folks like you, I am only more convinced that its authors and compilers were far more interested in the creatures and the characters, with the stories and the songs of it than they were with tidy moral lessons or key takeaways. It's the best selling book of all time. But almost everyone who's ever tried to read it from start to finish abandoned the project somewhere in Leviticus, wishing that on the eighth day God had created a few decent editors.

So maybe it shouldn't surprise us that Isaiah 40 doesn't mention lofty concepts like justice or mercy or even love. It's a poem about the way the Creator of all that is pays life-giving attention, not to princes and rulers and powerful people, who are accustomed to living in the spotlight, but to the weak and the weary ones. God's healing fascination turns toward the young and the exhausted. The ones who understandably feel most overlooked and ignored. And we get the sense from Isaiah that God pays this unlikely attention to those of us grasshoppers who seem most weary and most weak, not because God is committed to some abstract principle like fairness. But because God can't look away, because God thinks you're an absolutely astonishingly beautiful little creature, even as you go about your astonishing little grasshopper life. And Isaiah says that, in the end, God's curious and intense affection for you is what will save you. Restore you. Redeem you.

Wendell Berry once wrote, "I take literally the statement in the Gospel of John that God loves the world. I believe that the world was created and approved by love, that it subsists, coheres, and endures by love, and that, insofar as it is redeemable, it can be redeemed only by love." Isaiah has shown us this truth, rather than told it to us, don't you think?

It needs to be said that creative, enduring, redeeming love for the world doesn't look the same in every situation. Sometime love looks like fierceness and fury, as the prophets rage about God's love for those who are persecuted and poor, or as anyone knows who's come between a mama bear and her cub. Sometimes love looks like heartbreak and sorrow. But as Cole Arthur Riley put it — watch for her at LPS, by the way — as she put it so beautifully, "True lament is

not born from that trite sentiment that the world is bad but rather from a deep conviction that it is worthy of goodness.” Maybe love is the source of all true and enduring forms of justice, because love cares so deeply for what is good in its beloved that it can’t look away when that goodness is denied or destroyed.

So it may seem to go without saying that salvation and redemption arise from God’s love for the world. But I can forget that any part I might play in making the world more healed and whole has to arise from my love for it as well. I’ve been called a fixer by people who would know. That means if something’s not quite right, I’m ready to jump in and make the necessary corrections as I see them. But read a little history, or just scroll through the morning’s news, and we’re reminded that almost all the horrors we humans have ever visited on one another have been committed by people convinced they were setting things right. If I’m truthful, I know that at times my own need to repair has less to do with love for what’s been injured or broken, and more to do with a need to be in control, or to be right, or maybe just to win. I still seem to have a lot of training in the way of love to undergo. Maybe you do too. Maybe that’s why we’re here.

When it’s my turn to pray with the eucharistic ministers before the service, I usually turn to an old collect in the back of the Book of Common Prayer that says, “Deliver us, when we draw near to you, from coldness of heart and wanderings of mind, that with steadfast thoughts and kindled affections we may worship you in spirit and in truth...” Kindled affections. Some of the old phrases still breathe off light, don’t they?

I probably shouldn’t limit the possible reasons a modern person might actually come to church, since so many modern persons can’t think of a single one. But I’m not sure there’s any reason for Jesus’s church to exist at all, except to kindle our affections for this world, and for the strange and starry-eyed Creator who made all of it and all of us out of nothing but love. I only need to know myself to know that there can be at least one too many confident fixers in the world, rallying their troops to make it into what we think is right. I’m not sure it’s possible for there to be too many people whose love for the world has been kindled and who work to make it more just only and always by the light of love’s fire.

Maybe a practice for all of us to consider as the season of Lent approaches, is to pay attention to what we pay attention to. Is it to things that serve our own sense of importance and control, that alienate us further from creation and from one another? Or will we pay our attention to what kindles our affection for God’s world a little more, especially for the faint and the powerless ones, the weary and the exhausted, whom God, the prophets all tell us, loves most intensely of all. For this world really was created and approved by love. It subsists, coheres, and endures by love, and insofar as it is redeemable, it can be redeemed only by love. The question for us, I suppose, is whether we’ll play our small part in that redemption by learning to love a little more of this world a little more deeply every day we’re given to be alive upon it.